

#8 Bristol Bay

THREAT: OPEN PIT MINING

Summary

Alaska Governor Frank Murkowski, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and a small group of mining companies plan to develop a major mining district — including plans for North America's largest open pit gold and copper mine — in the headwaters of the Kvichak and Nushagak rivers. These rivers form the heart of the Bristol Bay drainages, and support the largest and most productive wild salmon fishery in the world. The proposed mining district would result in a perpetual risk of toxic runoff that threatens to harm the health of nearby communities, while potentially decimating the fishery and poisoning nearby wildlife.

The Rivers

The Bristol Bay watershed is an intricate system of lakes, streams, and rivers southwest of



EMILY CHENEL

Anchorage, Alaska that remains remarkably unchanged by human activity. The watershed is an integral part of the state's economy and has provided sustainable jobs, subsistence foods, and other benefits to Alaska Natives — including the Yupik Eskimos, Aleuts and Athabascan Indians — for generations.

There are no significant dams and few roads. With only sparse trees, it has not been subjected to logging. In addition to spectacular salmon and trout runs, the Bristol Bay area provides a home to brown bears, moose, one of Alaska's largest herds of caribou and a very rare freshwater seal population.

The Kvichak River is home to the single largest salmon run on the planet. The Nushagak River hosts the largest king salmon run in Alaska. The region's spectacular salmon runs result in an annual catch numbering in the tens of millions. The area also includes Alaska's first designated trophy trout area, attracting more wilderness recreation than any other area of the state.

The Threat

As the demand for gold continues to climb, a new, more toxic gold and copper rush — that uses cyanide to extract the metals — is taking place in Alaska. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the hardrock mining industry is the biggest toxic polluter in the country, yet the industry faces some of the weakest environmental regulations. These operations blast and excavate several tons of rock to retrieve mere ounces of gold. Open pit mines using cyanide and other toxic chemicals to leach gold and copper from the rubble have left a legacy of water pollution in their wake. This, in turn, costs taxpayers billions of dollars in cleanup costs to remove sulfuric acid and toxic heavy metals from water supplies after the mines close. Even minute quantities of these leached toxins are deadly to juvenile salmon and trout.

Governor Murkowski and the BLM are attempting to develop an enormous mining district in the pristine Bristol Bay watershed. This proposed district poses the single greatest threat to the region's environment and the commercial fishing economy. Of particular concern, Northern Dynasty Mines, Inc. proposes building the Pebble Project, North America's largest open pit gold and copper mine, in the Bristol Bay headwaters. The open pit would cover more than two square miles and would be at least 1,600-foot deep. The entire mine complex, including a tailings



ALASKA SPORTSMAN'S LODGE

THE SINGLE LARGEST SOURCE OF TOXIC RELEASES IN AMERICA, HARDROCK MINING, ENDANGERS THE FERTILE RIVERS OF BRISTOL BAY WITH CYANIDE, SULFURIC ACID, AND OTHER TOXIC CHEMICALS, THREATENING WILDLIFE, AND LOCAL RESIDENTS.

lagoon potentially holding billions of tons of chemically treated mine waste, would cover approximately 15 square miles. One lake and several streams — which contain salmon, northern pike and other gamefish — would be completely eliminated. Wildlife could drink from the toxic tailings lagoons, and runoff from the mining operation could taint drinking water supplies and salmon spawning and rearing habitat.

What's At Stake

The proposed Pebble Project and the proposed broader mining district threaten a way of life that has sustained the residents of the Bristol Bay area for generations, while posing a significant danger to the native fish and wildlife. Downstream residents draw drinking water from the Kvichak and Nushagak rivers, and the local economy is built on the salmon runs, supporting both large-scale commercial fishing and a world-class sport fishery. The Alaska Native villages in the watershed still rely on the robust yearly salmon harvest for survival.

The 12-Month Outlook

A strong alliance has formed to oppose this unprecedented risk to Alaska's environment and the native fisheries, including Alaska Native leaders, commercial fishermen, hunters, anglers, and conservation organizations.

Mining proponents are highly motivated and the Northern Dynasty corporation has announced its intention to apply for mining permits in early 2007 from the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. The agency should protect the communities, fisheries, and wildlife that depend on the Bristol Bay watershed, and deny Northern Dynasty's permit.

The BLM has an opportunity to protect its lands in the region, including the site of the proposed mine, in its Resource Management Plan. The agency is currently scheduled to release the Draft Resource Management Plan in late 2006, and should include preferred alternatives such as closing the area to mining.

Contact Info

QUINN MCKEW, American Rivers, (202) 347-7550 ext. 3069, qmckew@americanrivers.org



EMILY CHENEY

SCOTT BRENNAN, Alaskans for Responsible Mining, (907) 440-0880, scott@reformakmines.org

JACK HOBSON, Nondalton Tribal Council, (907) 294-2204

BRIAN KRAFT, Alaska Sportsman's Lodge, (907) 227-8719, bkraft@alaskasportsmanslodge.com

DAVID HARSILA, Alaska Independent Fisherman's Marketing Association, (206) 618-3824, excel@seanet.com

SUBSISTENCE, COMMERCIAL, AND RECREATIONAL FISHERMEN DEPEND ON THE BRISTOL BAY'S SPECTACULAR SALMON AND TROUT RUNS—SOME OF THE LARGEST IN THE WORLD.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO TAKE ACTION:
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